



## GUNPOWDER MEETING HOUSE: A SHORT HISTORY OF THE OLD METHODIST CHURCH

Many believe this structure could be the oldest Methodist meeting house still standing in America. The building is probably one of the oldest Methodist churches in the United States. The actual building is very small, measuring 26 feet by 35 feet, and consists of one room with a loft. The construction materials were brick and mortar. The mortar contained oyster shell.



The history of the church was closely connected with the Presbury House or Quiet Lodge, built in 1720, and the establishment of Methodism in America. The first recorded quarterly meeting in American Methodism took place December 23, 1772 at the Joseph Presbury home. Available records indicated that Bishop Francis Asbury, one of the two founding Methodist Bishops, visited Presbury's 14 times between December 3, 1772 and January 10, 1777. The Reverend John Littlejohn was thought to be the first preacher to specifically mention "Presbury's Preaching House" in his writing.

Bishop Asbury directed construction of the church in 1773 on one acre of land, commonly known as "Presbury Discovery," deeded to nine trustees for one shilling by Joseph Presbury. The nine trustees were John Watters, Nathan Horner, George York, James Weatherall, Barnard Preston, Henry Watters, Godfrey Waters, Benjamin Harbard, and Joshua Owings. There is some question whether the current building was the same building mentioned as the "lately created meeting house" described in the land deed of March 13, 1773 (see below). A later deed, dated October 4, 1838, in which Ms. Mary Ann Watters conveyed to Ms. Mary Saunders the tracts of "Collett's Neglect" and "Presbury's Discovery" contained the clause: "Excepting and reserving one acre of ground with building thereon as formerly conveyed by Joseph Presbury to certain trustees for a place of worship."

In his journal, Bishop Asbury wrote: "On Saturday, October 26, 1778, after meeting with two preachers we took sweet counsel together. And after I had preached the next day at Gunpowder Neck, we held a love feast. There was a great melting among the people, which I hope will be the first-fruits of a gracious harvest."

The church eventually became known as the Gunpowder Neck Methodist Episcopal Church and its membership came from Edgewood, Magnolia, and Gunpowder Neck. In 1886, the congregation divided and the church was abandoned. A portion of the original congregation built their own Methodist Episcopal Church in Magnolia in 1888. The Edgewood residents built Edgewood Methodist Episcopal Church in 1898. These congregations merged to become Presbury United Methodist Church, named after Joseph Presbury, in January 1968.

In 1890, the church was sold to a Black Methodist Episcopal congregation and was used by them for a school house as well as a church. One account described how the "white folks" stood in the balcony to watch their servants "get religion." The one-room school house held classes throughout the week and church services were held in the evenings and on Sundays. The name of the church was changed to the Gunpowder Station of the Methodist Church of Magnolia, but was often referred to as "Old Presbury." A small cemetery was apparently established in the 1890s behind the church and used for church members.



After the Army took over Gunpowder Neck in 1917 to establish a chemical production and filling plant, the Harford County Board of Education, which then operated the school, sold the building to the Government for \$225 in 1919. The Army used the building first as a band headquarters and then as a grenade storage facility during World War I.

Over the years, the Army forgot about the history of the church and allowed the building to decay. By the 1960s, the building was described as "unsightly and in a hazardous condition." At an Aberdeen Proving Ground (APG) Facilities Directorate Planning Board meeting on January 31, 1963, the building was approved for disposal (destruction), but then removed from the disposal list on December 13, 1963. In April 1964, an estimate of \$3,000 was given as a rough estimate of the cost to restore the building to its original condition. At the Planning Board meeting on April 19, 1966, the church was again placed on the list for disposal. The committee then completed all the administrative paperwork to dispose of the building and awaited the Commander of Edgewood Arsenal's approval.



The Army decided, however, to avoid possible adverse press and public reaction, and sought public and professional opinions on the building. Colonel William W. Stone, Jr., then took command of Edgewood Arsenal in 1966. During his orientation tour around the arsenal, he was informed that the church was going to be demolished. He instructed the engineers in November 1966 to defer destruction of the building indefinitely and check with historical societies about the significance of the building. The response from the Methodist Historical Society and other individuals convinced Colonel Stone to try to have the building declared a historical site and preserved.

Within a few years, Executive Order 11593, issued May 15, 1971 provided for the "protection and enhancement of the cultural environment." In 1972, therefore, the Army became responsible for restoration of historic structures and decided to restore the building. A Federal Survey of the building was completed January 20, 1972.

The first step for renovation consisted of a structural review. The Army called in an architect to complete a historical and architectural research study and to estimate the cost of the restoration. Mr. Orin Bullock, Jr., the historical architect, completed his study and concluded that the building was restorable. He stated, however, that the current structure was built between 1820 and 1860 on an older foundation. He thought portions of the earlier structure still remained.

The actual cost of the restoration project totaled \$70,000. Much of the work involved restoring the original brick facing. Many of the bricks were worn or missing. The construction workers replaced some of the missing or damaged bricks with bricks taken from other parts of the building. The workers also were careful in mixing the mortar to make sure it matched the existing mortar. They replaced all the existing door and window frames with replicas ordered from a historical supplier that specialized in 18th century hardware. They also installed a new wood-shingle roof, deck overlay, and plaster ceiling and rebuilt the balcony and stairway in the back of the building and the pulpit in the front.

According to Mr. Calvin Dixon, Chief of the Architectural Branch at APG's Facilities Engineering Directorate and in charge of the restoration, "We made every effort to restore the building exactly as it was. The construction workers put in a lot of hard work into making the building look like it had originally." Additional work included a new concrete-sub floor and electrical service. In January 1983, the Army completed the restoration project and the building was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

The first church service in 66 years in the building was held August 4, 1983 and conducted by Lieutenant Colonel W. R. Ward, Chaplain at the Edgewood Chapel on post. In 1988, the Army added mounted wooden pews removed from an old chapel in the Aberdeen Area of APG. The Army continues to preserve the church for special worship services and as a point of interest for historical tours.

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